

# **Queer Disconnection, Desire and Defiance:**

The Cyberfeminist Roleplay World

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## Queer Disconnection, Desire and Defiance: The Cyberfeminist Roleplay World

“The physical world [...] is a place where identity and position of the people you communicate with are well known, fixed, and highly visual. In cyberspace, everybody is in the dark.”

—From *A Slice of Life in My Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold (1993)

Imagine this. You are a person, a body on this earth. Every day you head about your life in the physical realm: you might choose to make breakfast, grab a coffee, play with your cats, take a bus to class, head to work, attend an exhibition by an up-and-coming-artist, phone your parents, meet up with a friend... or you might simply choose to stay at home. Just one thing is different about you: you have the ability to ‘log in’ to another life when you so wish. This does not mean you are escaping reality and entering a separate realm, no. You are able to do this fluidly. At the tap of your fingers, you can switch into virtual life as a 22 year old celebrity named Jennie and reply to other ‘characters’ in your alternate-life community, all while ordering said coffee in real life. You might even choose to alternate between this character and another, and another, and another throughout your day.

Welcome to the virtual realm of the Roleplay World (RPW).

To set the scene, let me unpack what RPW specifically means in the context of this essay. When the term ‘roleplay’ is mentioned in relation to the virtual realm, the most common association it garners is with massively multiplayer online role-playing game roleplaying games (MMORPGs). These in itself have a rich history: they are effectively descendants of ‘MUD’s, also known as multi-user dungeons, multi-user dimensions or multi-user domains, which was first created in 1975.<sup>1</sup> These were real-time social virtual domains that ‘combined elements of role-playing games, hack and slash, player versus

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<sup>1</sup> “Multi-User Dungeon,” Wikipedia, November 8, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multi-user\\_dungeon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multi-user_dungeon).

player, interactive fiction, and online chat.’ The RPW I am mentioning is similar in a sense where it is a ‘[world] for social interaction in a virtual space, [a world] in which you can present yourself as a “character”, in which you can be anonymous, in which you can play a role or roles as close or as far away from your “real self” as you choose’.<sup>2</sup> However, it distinctly does not contain any of the gaming qualities or domain-specific narratives that MMPORGs or MUDs have. In its beginnings, text roleplaying was hosted on online chat platforms, like AOL and MSN<sup>3</sup>, but it was the organised, spatial qualities (i.e. integrated separations of channels, groups, profiles, timelines, posts and private messaging) of social media platforms like Myspace, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr that began to shape the specific RPWs we know of today. Completely up to the individual, RPWs are saturated, fluid, and ever-transforming spaces, branching out into different universes and sectioned by user language, with the majority of such spaces linked directly to fandoms and niche interest groups (for example, a fan of Harry Potter might roleplay as Hermoine Granger on Facebook, along with other individuals in the same ‘Wizarding World’ universe.)

Although I am writing for RPWs generally, I will be focusing my analysis on examples from KRPW, also known as Korean Roleplay World. KRPW is a bracket term for communities that fashion their characters after the physical likeness of a celebrity in the South Korean entertainment scene (note that ‘Korean’ in this context does not refer to race but geographical location - the South Korean entertainment scene has several non-Korean celebrities.) The specific choice of likeness, communally termed ‘face-claiming’, is the only rule that determines one’s inclusion in KRPW. Like other RPW spheres, everything else - including gender, names, backstories, personalities, preferences - is left entirely up to the writer’s imagination, though notably trends in character-building are quick to reflect real-life politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Sherry Turkle, “Constructions and Reconstructions of Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDs,” *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 1, no. 3 (June 1994): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039409524667>.

<sup>3</sup> Stray\_Brat\_Strut, “LOL You Heard It Here Folks, You Couldn’t RP before the Invention of the iPhone,” Reddit, February 11, 2023, [https://www.reddit.com/r/BadRPerStories/comments/10zo3ql/lol\\_you\\_heard\\_it\\_here\\_folks\\_you\\_couldnt\\_rp\\_before/](https://www.reddit.com/r/BadRPerStories/comments/10zo3ql/lol_you_heard_it_here_folks_you_couldnt_rp_before/).

This is the key reason why I have chosen to focus on RPWs instead of traditional MMPORGs: its multiplicity. In most MMPORGs you can only choose between pre-set avatars of male and female, and have to work within player roles usually structured by gender stereotypes: ‘[o]f those players who sex-swapped, many more female game characters were in healing roles, whereas male characters tended to be used for player-vs-player (PvP) combat, and this is largely because [...] healing roles and PvP roles tend to follow stereotypical gendered patterns, functionally and by design’<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, unlike the male-dominated circles of most popular MMPORGs like World of Warcraft and the Final Fantasy franchise, RPWs are overwhelmingly constituted by a femme and nonbinary majority. These factors, among others, lead me to posit it through cyberfeminist theory as a truly feminised, emancipatory realm, where virtual identities slip and slide against each other, desires intermingle and explode, and potentials are birthed from disconnectivity.

## **I. The Cyberspace is Feminine**

Cyberfeminism is a postmodernist term, first coined by Australian artist group VNS Matrix in 1991 and Sadie Plant in 1994, though independent from each other.<sup>5</sup> The ideology was birthed out of a feminist concern with new-media technology and virtuality, ‘see[ing] cyberspace and the internet as a utopian way of liberation from societal conceptions such as gender and sex difference’.<sup>6</sup> Reading through Sadie Plant’s work, *Zeroes and Ones* (1997), she provides a compelling argument that technology is feminine. This concept ‘materialises itself historically in the weaving processes of industrial power looms, in the predominantly female telephone operators, in the trope of the woman as computer programmer (Ada Lovelace, Grace Murray Hopper) and in the web-like structure of

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<sup>4</sup>Jennifer Jenson et al., “Playing with Our Selves,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 5 (February 11, 2015): 860–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1006652>.

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, “Cyberfeminism,” Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, March 22, 2019), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberfeminism>.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. G. Surya, “Resonating Cyberfeminist Manifesto With Reference to the Witcher 3: Wild Hunt”, *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities*, Volume 7, Issue 2, Page Number 4-8, 2022.

cyberspace', claiming that '[t]he matrix weaves itself in a future which has no place for historical man'.<sup>7</sup> Cyberspace is thus characterised as a site of emasculation, where its unpredictability, prosthesis, 'hysterical' hypertext communications and Jacquard-loom-origin constitutes its potential to flip the patriarchy over its head, 'open[ing] up new possibilities for the creation of a female-dominant culture.'<sup>8</sup> I bring Plant's theory together with Donna Haraway's writings on cyborgs and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity: For Haraway, 'cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves', transgressing boundaries between binaries of object and subject, self and other, and the human and machine.<sup>9</sup> Butler writes of gender as a 'construction that regularly conceals its genesis'<sup>10</sup> [...] through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time<sup>11</sup>.

## II. A slippery space

In "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?", Stone claims that unlike existing binaries that serve as 'a strategy for maintaining boundaries for political and economic ends, and thus a way of making meaning', 'the insertion of the body into virtual space actually produces meaning through the articulation of differences' (Galloway, 1998). Like Foucault's rejection of the "repressive hypothesis," Stone claims that new technologies are not transparent agents that remove issues of gender from view, but rather they proliferate the production and organisation of gendered bodies in space.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alex Galloway, "A Report on Cyberfeminism," SWITCH: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 6. 1998.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol9/iss1/6>

<sup>8</sup> Jongsuk Ham, "Fluctuating Identities in Cyberspace and Cyberfeminism: A Comparison of Philippine and Korean Experiences" (Review of Women's Studies 20 (1-2), 2010), <https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/rws/article/view/3533>.

<sup>9</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 181.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*. (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). 273.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 274.

<sup>12</sup> Galloway, Alex, "A Report on Cyberfeminism," SWITCH: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 6. 1998.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol9/iss1/6>



*Fig 1. Screenshots of pronouns in KRPW profiles on Twitter, also known as X*

In KRPW, gender, sex, and sexuality slip and slide. The Korean entertainment scene has a relatively conservative culture reflecting that of South Korea's, where issues like sexuality and gender identity are not discussed. Queer entertainers are essentially obsolete from the mainstream entertainment scene. Yet, gender and sexual identities are typically the first thing a roleplayer would state on their profile (Fig. 1). Perhaps due to how these aspects of identity remain unconfirmed by the real-life celebrity, they are mutable when a roleplayer constructs their character. If gender and sexuality are technologies of being, RPW seems to be a space where these technologies come to the surface not in how they work-as-programmed but in how they do not, creating variant possibility from the gender and sexuality absences of their face-claims who serve as blank slates. Here, gender is at the height of its performance through the illumination of its backstage assemblages, the behind-the-scenes of

construction, as characters are built and socialised within a network of other virtual bodies. Besides this ability to embody gender and sexual identities one might not be able to in real life, the relations between roleplayer and character come to my attention. Male and female face-claims enjoy similar levels of popularity, with many ‘bases’<sup>13</sup> typically having an even ratio of male to female face-claims. However, the roleplayer gender makeup in KRPW is constituted of an overwhelming majority of women, followed by non-binary individuals, and finally a relatively small portion of trans-men. Cis-men are extremely few and far, far between. To paint a good picture, one roleplayer tells me they have “only met three cis-men in [their] ten years of roleplaying.” A statistic influenced by the gender makeup on the fanbase itself<sup>14</sup> is likely, however, cismen remain a far smaller proportion of communities even in other RPW universes. This creates a uniquely feminised space fuelled by queer desire. Everything is at play here: I have met cis-women who had a preference for playing male characters because ‘it felt more comfortable’, straight individuals who would adopt a differing sexual identity for their characters, nonbinary or transgender people who found comfort in expressing their gender identity in characters that might not ‘pass’ in real life. In Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin’s 2001 book *Mapping Cyberspace*, they quote several cyberfeminist authors to exemplify how ‘bases of identity’ are ‘shift[ed]’ by cyberspace. This is achieved through ‘cyborging’ as bodily extension (Haraway 1991), providing ‘a space of disembodiment, as the mind enters a space of interaction free of the body, and its associated codings (e.g., gender, race)’ (Stone 1991), and the dislocation of self (Mitchell 1995; Adams 1997). Dodge and Kitchin continue with Foucault’s ‘technology of the self’ as an appropriate term for cyberspace, ‘a device which affects the social construction of identity by altering the conditions under which it is constructed (Aycock 1995)’<sup>15</sup>. In RPW, the individual is fluid, unbound, always transforming, always multiple.

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<sup>13</sup> In RPW, ‘bases’ are essentially communal sites. There is usually one ‘base’ account that manages the entrance and departure of members. Bases can either be open or closed: an open base means members are free to interact with unaffiliated characters, while closed bases restrict interactions between participating members only.

<sup>14</sup> ㅇㅇ . “아이돌별 팬덤 연령대, 성별 비율 찢네.jpg (Trans: Fandom Age/Gender Ratio Statistics per Idol Group).” 네이트 판 (Nate Pann), January 24, 2022. <https://pann.nate.com/talk/364708189>.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, *Mapping Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2001). 53.

We can imagine RPW as a ‘prosthesis’, a ‘giant phantom limb’<sup>16</sup> through which we interact. According to Stone, technologies of communication function as “1) an apparatus for the production of community... 2) an apparatus for the production of body... [and] 3) a mediating [agent] between bodies and selves...i.e., interfaces.” How binary code can lead to such embodied ways of navigation and connection is fascinating, highlighting how ‘a participatory social practice (i.e. community) based on an imagined ether-scape of desiring and interacting bodies is basic to how we conceptualise digital spaces’<sup>17</sup>. Clearly, the concept of body cannot be eliminated when one considers the relationship between woman and machine. “Bodies generally are all the rage on the Net—whether they are obsolete, cyborg, techno, porno, erotic, morphed, recombined, phantom, or viral.”<sup>18</sup> In a space where the body is trying to be forgotten, it is remembered and desired. A new kind of focus is generated.

### **III. A queer disconnection**

In much writing about social networks and anonymity, critics have characterised this means of communication as ‘disconnected’. The popular slant on MMPORGs or roleplaying in general is one that characterises them as some sort of unhealthy escapism, of a break from reality. Roleplaying is dismissed as unrealistic, and even delusional. However, I wish to queer the notion of ‘disconnection’ and frame it as always in relation to, instead of against, heteronormative conceptualisations of ‘connection’. What does it mean to be disconnected from gender, the body, the self, and physical reality? By doing so, I believe potentialities will arise.

In RPW, belief is suspended. When I log in as a character, I know for a fact that the characters I am interacting with all have a ‘real-life’ person behind them, but in the virtual realm they are not of primary interest. However, this disconnectivity is co-constituted by connectivity: as much as we were

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<sup>16</sup> Galloway, Alex, “A Report on Cyberfeminism,” SWITCH: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 6. 1998.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol9/iss1/6>

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble, “Notes on the Political Conditions of Cyberfeminism”. *Art Journal* 57, no.2 (summer 1998): 47-59



‘disconnected’ from our characters, we were still ‘connected’ in how we would lend them our voice, typing style, or character traits. As one roleplayer stated, ‘who you act as and who you are will always overlap’. Even if I draw a boundary between who I am in real life and who my character is in KRPW, the emotions and experiences I receive from and encode into the virtual body of the character spill over each other, showing how human, virtual and mechanical prosthesis are always in a porous relation. The RPW is a glorious culmination of the Net’s spatiality: characters can interact in circles ranging anywhere from a couple of friends in a private account to within an open ‘base’ spanning hundreds to thousands. These online identities interact in a blend of being ‘in-character’ and ‘out of character’, where conversations are designated to specific spaces or marked by symbols depending on which voice is used (for example, if I were to speak out-of-character, I would mark the start of my sentence with the symbol ‘/’.) The community is simultaneously connected and disconnected - or rather, it is disconnection that reconditions what connection is in a RPW, and allows it to happen. In her text *Queer Disconnections: Affect, Break, and Delay in Digital Connectivity*, Jenny Sunden conceptualises ‘relational norms of constant and continuous connectivity’ as ‘ideals of hetero-normality’, raising examples like an ‘uninterrupted monogamy’ and ‘epitomised by the marriage’. If we look at ‘real-life’ social media as a ‘form of linear continuity reinforced through digital connectivity’<sup>19</sup>, RPWs, in necessitating a ‘break’ from real-life to enter a fake persona, into a life that is completely virtual and has little to no fidelity to one’s true likeness, can be characterised in tandem as alternative spaces that are birthed from a ‘real-life’ disconnection. This ‘break’ is what ‘makes the signal’ — disconnection may ‘intensify the connection, as well as open up for other connections, in parallel’<sup>20</sup>.

I wish to bring in the practice of queering disconnection in gender and sexuality, and how RPWs are rife with gender dissonances, disconnections, and identity fractals. As I mentioned earlier in the essay, trends in character-building are quick to reflect real-life politics (see page 1). Although queer identities in RPWs have always been common (a characteristic of most marginal spaces), it is a recent trend that

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<sup>19</sup> Jenny Sundén, “Queer Disconnections : Affect, Break, and Delay in Digital Connectivity,” *Transformation*, no. 31 (January 1, 2018), [http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Trans31\\_04\\_sunden.pdf](http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Trans31_04_sunden.pdf). 73.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

pronouns have begun to proliferate its realm. RPWs are connected and disconnected to 'real-life' in this sense: 'In [RPWs], the projections of self are engaged in a resolutely postmodern context. Authorship is not only displaced from a solitary voice, it is exploded. The self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to "try out" new ones. [RPWs] are a new environment for the construction and reconstruction of self.' (Turkle 1994) The connection to real-life does not end for roleplayers when they log in to a RPW, they simply transform and perform themselves in multiplicities. If real-life was like a sandbox, RPWs would not be a sandcastle but the act of playing itself. I, as have many others, have experimented with my gender and sexual identity long before I even realised my 'real' persona was taking shape in that direction. In fact, the act of roleplaying might have even helped orientate us as such, and bring objects without our reach within<sup>21</sup>. I have seen several FTM (female-to-male) friends realise they were transgender through the process of roleplaying, and many of them 'face-claimed' men pre-transition. I was attracted to women in KRPW long before I realised I was actually bisexual in 'real life'. As a femme individual who has 'face-claimed men', this act in itself is effective in destabilising performative notions of gender. In KRPW, there is no need to 'act like a man' to embody one. When I face-claimed men and realised it was, in fact, enjoyable to 'feel' like a man, or be perceived as one on the virtual realm, it helped me re-evaluate my relationship with gender fluidity and performativity.

To tie in RPWs' dis/connection, I bring in Sunden once again. I begin first with her theorising of the glitch 'as mess that is a moment, as possibility to glance at software's inner structure, whether it is a mechanism of data compression or HTML code'<sup>22</sup>, and compare the spaces of RPWs to sites of glitching and disconnection. She goes on to introduce the concept of 'high fidelity' in gender<sup>23</sup>:

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<sup>21</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Jenny Sundén,, On trans-, glitch, and gender as machinery of failure. 2015. First Monday, 20(4).  
<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i4.5895>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

“[T]he question of passing — of being able to slip by rather than slip — which within a gender technological framework could be thought of as gender ‘high fidelity.’ The notion of high fidelity in the technologies of music production and playback is, simply put, a striving toward finding new ways in which the medium erases itself. And yet, every attempt to erase the technology have merely re-introduced its presence in new ways: “The music industry has spent over a hundred years creating devices that allegedly have higher and higher fidelity, but new technologies have merely introduced new glitches.” [27] Emily Thompson (1995) traces the history of how ‘fidelity’ has been imagined in relation to the shifting use of the phonograph, showing that faithfulness to the source, and truthful representation were early interpretations. Since the 1890s, and when the phonograph became a source of music rather than simply a transmitter of words, quality of tone has been the primary criterion and selling point for new playback technologies. In a landscape of new media and digital sound production, this striving often translates as a desire to cover or remove ‘noise,’ to clear the channel.”

Gender high fidelity is a poignant point, because the urge to make technology undetectable can be seen as a masculine, patriarchal urge to make oppressive ideologies ‘seamless’ in their operations, compared to the femininity of prosthesis, extension, and ‘becom[ing] the cyborg ... [by] put[ting] on the female.’<sup>24</sup> To have high fidelity is in part ‘about being faithful to something originary, some un-technological or non-technological’<sup>25</sup>. However, as Sunden firmly reiterates, this ‘originary scene’ does not exist, and never did, and bodies are never ‘technologically untouched, originary, [or] natural’<sup>26</sup>.

Through RPWs, we might come to conceptualise disconnection and low-fidelity performances as relations that produce possibilities, to reimagine forms of commune and interacting in this vast virtual

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<sup>24</sup> Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones : <> : The New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997). 210.

<sup>25</sup> Jenny Sundén, On trans-, glitch, and gender as machinery of failure. 2015. *First Monday*, 20(4). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i4.5895>

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

network. It might even serve as ‘a space for catching one’s breath, for sensing things more deeply, for re-charging the re-connect when it happens with a built-up intensity.’<sup>27</sup>

#### IV. Hysteric directions

In 1833, a teenage girl met a machine which she came to regard “as a friend.” It was a futuristic device which seemed to have dropped into her world at least a century before its time.

The quote opens for a chapter on Ada Lovelace, English mathematician and writer, and important co-creator of the Analytical Engine, a conception so far ahead of time that it would move technology forwards, ‘assembling the processes and components from which it would eventually be built.’<sup>28</sup> It strikes a chord within me: I was twelve when I discovered KRPW, and at the time it had seemed like such an unfathomable idea, to pretend being somebody in a world of pretend-bodies, to a mind of somebody who conceived the Internet as strictly tethered to reality. Could we see RPWs then carriers of what Plant describes as ‘hysteresis, the lagging of effects behind their causes’<sup>29</sup>, could we see these spaces as hacking the binary, of conceptualising a future self before assembling a means to reach it? This irrational, deviant directionality ‘defined as hysterical as men’<sup>30</sup>, this reverse order, this ability to jump from one reality to the next to the next to the next in a network of hypertext. If we describe the Internet, and technology as a whole, as expected to be ‘centralised, programmable systems running on impeccably logical lines’, we can compare the rogue space of RPWs to reflect its ‘wildly unpredictable’ nature.<sup>31</sup> As Stone argues, virtual spaces are crucial sites of embodied reconfigurations through the

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Sadie Plant, *Zeroes and Ones : <> : The New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997). 22.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Jongsuk Ham, “Fluctuating Identities in Cyberspace and Cyberfeminism: A Comparison of Philippine and Korean Experiences” (*Review of Women’s Studies* 20 (1-2), 2010), <https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/rws/article/view/3533>.

<sup>31</sup> Sadie Plant, *Zeroes and Ones : <> : The New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997). 33.

‘interactional possibilities of networked spaces’<sup>32</sup>. With new technologies come new breakdowns, new mimicry, new disconnections and ultimately, new potentials.

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<sup>32</sup> Jordan Kraemer, “Gender of the Interface,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 7, no. 2 (October 26, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v7i2.34734>.

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